

# Vladimir Putin and the Russian Military

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**Synopsis:** Since his return as Russian president in May 2012, Putin has made military modernization a top priority. Yet strengthening the Russian military is only one component in the larger Kremlin strategy of building a multi-polar global order, where Russia serves as an opposing pole to the West, especially the US. He understands the importance of a strong ideology, as well as the dangers of inordinate military spending. His views toward security and defense go far beyond pure military means and encompass all elements of national power (e.g., economic, information, cultural, espionage, diplomatic, etc.). The military is merely one instrument in his arsenal to strengthen the Russian state and the survival of his regime. This monograph examines the geopolitical background to the Russian military's evolution under Putin, its current status, and some possible future implications.

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# **Vladimir Putin and the Russian Military**

## **Ray Finch, FMSO**

### **Introduction**

Vladimir Putin served on the front lines during the Cold War as a KGB agent in Dresden, helping to defend the Soviet-communist order. As the Party was ending, Putin had a front row seat to the collapse of Communism and Soviet influence in Eastern Europe. Despite the presence of overwhelming military superiority, he saw firsthand how useless all the Soviet weaponry had become without backing of political will. The Soviet leadership had lost faith in the communist ideal, and when protests broke out against the ruling regime in East Germany, and Putin turned to Moscow for guidance, the response was silence.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the Kremlin's reticence stemmed from the conviction that their form of political and economic system needed to be reformed. Using military force to crush popular protests did not align with the party leadership's "new thinking." Protests against the old order continued to spread and it was not long before the new Russian leadership renounced Communism and pledged to adopt an ideology more aligned with Western forms of democracy and a market economy. These pledges, however, became largely discredited in Russia during the 1990s, as the political system veered toward authoritarianism and where much of the national economy was pilfered. With regard to a new ideology, the Kremlin remained adrift.

Before Putin became president he had completed a dissertation built around the thesis that to modernize the Russian economy and improve the general well-being of the population, the country's leadership needed to gain greater control over key sectors of the Russian economy. Revenues from the sale of natural resources could help "in building up the economy, providing revenue and jobs, and promoting economic integration within Russia, with the CIS and with the world economy." As the Cold War had just recently ended and country's leadership was still looking for closer cooperation with the West, there was no specific mention in Putin's dissertation of harnessing this wealth to rebuild Russia's military forces.<sup>2</sup>

During his first two terms as president (2000-2008) Putin did more than just pay lip service to his dissertation's thesis. While higher fossil fuel prices certainly helped, and although he and close associates amassed huge fortunes, incomes and the standard of living improved for most Russians. The Russian economy grew at an impressive rate, pensions were paid on time and a portion of the country's resource wealth was spent on capital improvements (e.g., healthcare, roads, education). Though not dramatic, there were also steady improvements within Russia's Armed Forces.

Concomitant with this improvement with living conditions were increasing signs that Russia did not accept the post-Cold War, Washington-led global order. A new Kremlin-supported ideology began to emerge under Putin which claimed that Russia remained a great power and that Russia enjoyed a certain sphere of influence. The ideology asserted that a multipolar global order (where Russia serves as a pole) was more stable than a

unipolar version. The emergence of this ideology coincided with increasing domestic political repression. As relations with the West became more strained, the Kremlin leadership began to place greater emphasis on strengthening its global pole, to include Russian military power.

Since his return as Russian president in May 2012, Putin has made military modernization a top priority. Yet strengthening the Russian military is only one component in the larger Kremlin strategy of building a multi-polar global order, where Russia serves as an opposing pole to the West, especially the US. Putin clearly remembers the utility of all that military hardware in East Germany as the Soviet system began to collapse. He understands the importance of a strong ideology, as well as the dangers of inordinate military spending. His views toward security and defense go far beyond pure military means and encompass all elements of national power (e.g., economic, information, cultural, espionage, diplomatic, etc.). The military is merely one instrument in his arsenal to strengthen the Russian state and the survival of his regime. This brief chapter will examine the geopolitical background to the Russian military's evolution under Putin, its current status, and some possible future implications.

## **Putin's Evolving View toward the Russian Military**

As in other aspects of his role as Russian leader, Putin's views toward the military have evolved over the past fifteen years. When he was appointed as prime minister (and possible successor to Yeltsin) in August 1999, he inherited a military which was in disarray. The decade following the collapse of the USSR had largely been an unmitigated tragedy for those serving in the military. After the humiliating retreat of Soviet/Russian forces from Eastern Europe and most of the republics of the former USSR, Russian military personnel confronted near economic collapse at home and a general disregard for their welfare. The catalog of illnesses was long: corruption flourished while many officers went months without being paid; decent housing was in short supply; draft dodging was rampant while criminality within the ranks increased; equipment maintenance deteriorated and research-development funding was slashed.

These weaknesses were manifested when Russian military forces were tasked to crush the separatist revolt in Chechnya in late 1994. Over the next two years Russian military forces displayed low morale and poor counterinsurgency skills. These weaknesses were aggravated by a lack of effective command and control (C2) and a casual disregard for the loss of human life—whether the “enemy,” civilian non-combatants, or their own soldiers. When a ceasefire agreement was signed in August 1996, many Russian senior military personnel again felt humiliated and betrayed. They would later claim that military operations had been hampered by short-term political constraints (e.g., the re-election of Yeltsin in May 1996) and high-level corruption. There was a growing divide between the Kremlin and Russia's disaffected military leadership.

President Yeltsin's declining physical health from 1997-99 was an apt metaphor for the general deterioration of the country and the military. Despite an influx of IMF loans,

Russia defaulted on its sovereign debt in late summer 1998, crashing the ruble and the country's banking system. Russia's economic uncertainty coincided with even greater political ambiguity as the Kremlin cycled through a number of possible Yeltsin replacements.

Against this background of almost total economic and political paralysis, US and other NATO countries began offensive military operations (without a UN resolution) against Serbia in March 1999. The argument that Western forces were responding to Serbian aggression against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo carried little weight in Moscow. Russian leaders bemoaned this unilateral use of air power against their Serb-Orthodox brothers. The Kosovo conflict proved to be a watershed in Russia's later foreign and military policy, "proving" that Russian concerns would only be heeded if backed by strong and robust military forces. Russian political and military leaders began to coalesce around the idea of reclaiming its global status by rebuilding its military.

The troubled Kremlin leadership was also concerned with the deteriorating conditions around Chechnya and the North Caucasus. The 1996 Khasavyurt ceasefire agreement had left Chechnya's with an ill-defined political status, allowing the war-torn province to devolve into banditry and religious extremism, which began to spread to adjacent regions in the summer of 1999.

Thus when Putin was appointed prime minister in August 1999, he confronted both significant domestic and international challenges. He began by promising to crush the Chechen insurgency in the North Caucasus. His tough rhetoric raised his profile to national (and electable) prominence. The decrepit state of Russia's conventional Armed Forces became painfully apparent to him: to assemble sufficient forces to stop the Chechen incursion into neighboring Dagestan, the Russian security agencies had to cobble combat-ready units together from around the country. They also relied heavily upon local defense forces in Dagestan.<sup>3</sup>

After defeating this incursion, the Kremlin went on to establish its mandate throughout all of Chechnya. During this stage of the Chechen conflict, Putin gained the respect among many military leaders by supporting and defending their often brutal strategy. Russian military forces enjoyed a distinct advantage in sheer firepower, employing massive artillery and air bombardment to flush out the separatists. Putin combined this mailed-fist strategy with an equally aggressive counterinsurgency effort, successfully co-opting important elements of the Chechen leadership.

As president, Putin had been in office less than six months when the nuclear submarine *Kursk* exploded and sank in the Barents Sea with a total loss of crew. This tragedy revealed to Putin not only the dire straits of Russia's strategic deterrent, but also the mendacity among some within the military's chain of command. It certainly also impressed upon the Russian leader the dangerous fallout from negative media coverage. This incident provided additional impetus for the Kremlin's consolidation and control over the country's major media, which, in turn, became an important tool in gaining domestic support.<sup>4</sup>

After the attacks on 9-11, Putin expressed both condolences and a willingness to cooperate with the US in the fight against Islamic extremism. Although some Russian military leaders complained, he allowed open access to the American military into Russia's Central Asian backyard. These goodwill gestures toward greater security cooperation were seemingly rejected three months later when the US unilaterally pulled out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty. From the Kremlin's perspective, this treaty abrogation was indicative of Washington's ingratitude and signaled that American military leaders were determined to pursue global military dominance by neutralizing Russia's nuclear retaliatory capability. The Kremlin would need to develop adequate nuclear countermeasures.

Kremlin concerns that the US was intent upon becoming the indispensable global hegemon were further confirmed during the run-up and initial stage of the Iraq conflict in early 2003. Russian officials argued that in employing armed force against Iraq, Washington would exceed the UN resolution, acting as though impervious to the objections of other UN members.<sup>5</sup> That Kremlin objections to the Iraq War were not heeded was expected; less understandable was the US-led plan to enlarge NATO right up to Russia's borders.

After the inclusion of the Baltic countries in March 2004, Russian officials continued to ask, somewhat rhetorically, "against whom was NATO planning to defend?" An ominous sign that the geopolitical climate within the Kremlin was changing occurred after the September 2004 terrorist attack in Beslan, North Ossetia (sometimes referred to as "Russia's 9-11"). Pro-Chechen fighters seized an elementary school in Beslan, demanding the removal of Russian military forces from Chechnya. Visiting the town once the fighting had stopped (330 killed, about of whom half children), Putin suggested that perhaps foreign security agencies had played a hand in the tragedy.<sup>6</sup> Russia would need robust security forces to handle both the domestic and foreign threats.

The Kremlin again saw Western meddling in the post-Soviet space during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in late 2004 and early 2005. Large demonstrations in Kiev against fraudulent election results resulted in the Kremlin-backed candidate losing to his pro-Western rival. They also saw Washington further spreading its influence in the Caucasus, when the pro-Western president in Georgia (who had come to power in the November 2003 Rose Revolution) invited his American counterpart to visit Tbilisi in May 2005. From the Kremlin's perspective, "democracy promotion" was merely a façade for the spread of greater American geopolitical influence. Putin would need to tailor his security forces to meet this new kind of threat.

As relations began to chill with the West, the Kremlin began to push back with more than just rhetoric. Three events from 2007 reflect this more assertive strategy. At the Munich Security Conference in February 2007, President Putin claimed that the US had abused its role as global leader, disregarding the legitimate interests of other countries, "overstepping its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations."<sup>7</sup>

In April 2007 ethnic Russian protesters took to the streets of the Estonian capital, Tallinn, after city officials decided to relocate a Soviet war memorial. These protests were followed by other forms of intimidation, including a massive cyber-attack against Estonia's digital infrastructure. Subsequent forensic evidence pointed to Kremlin-sponsored hackers. The Kremlin would continue to develop its cyber and information capabilities.<sup>8</sup>

US plans to install a missile defense system in Europe to protect against a possible missile strike from Iran were interpreted by the Kremlin as possibly weakening their strategic retaliatory capability. Negotiations in 2007-08 to include some level of Russian expertise into this system went nowhere. In December 2007, after years of diplomatic haggling, the Kremlin announced it would no longer abide by the provisions of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty, claiming that the treaty no longer served Russia's security interests and signaling that it was less willing to engage in mutual discussions with its Western counterparts over European security.<sup>9</sup> Russian military planners began to more frequently cite an observation attributed to Tsar Alexander III: "Russia has only two allies-her army and navy."

Relations between Russia and the West continued to deteriorate after Kosovo declared independence in February 2008, which was soon recognized by most Western countries. In early April 2008 the Kremlin reacted strongly when the US lobbied for a NATO membership plan for Ukraine and Georgia at the Bucharest Summit. Nor did they appreciate the high-level visit by President Bush to meet with his Ukrainian counterpart in Kiev that same week. During the Victory Day celebration in Moscow on 9 May, the Kremlin again sent a strong message, when for the first time in 20 years it decided to include its latest military equipment in the Red Square parade. Putin understands the power of spectacle and virtual hard-power in mobilizing public support.

During Putin's second tour as president (2004-08) the Kremlin supported a significant increase in media programming dealing with the Russian military and other security services. Besides the creation of a dedicated television and media conglomerate within the Ministry of Defense (Zvezda TV network), the Kremlin has helped to fund a number of military programs within the other major television networks.<sup>10</sup> Alongside informing viewers of the latest positive developments within the Russian military, these programs have helped to raise overall defense consciousness among viewers. As mentioned earlier, Putin clearly understood the importance of harnessing Russia's information space in defending the Kremlin's interests.

Tensions continued to escalate between Russia and Georgia (new US ally) throughout the summer of 2008, leading to open hostilities in August. From the Kremlin's perspective, even though Russian military forces had experienced some difficulty in routing the Georgian forces, this brief conflict was "proof" that Russia would no longer be pushed around, particularly in its traditional sphere of influence. Under the new placeholder president, Dmitry Medvedev, the Kremlin continued to insist that it would not accept a US-led global order and that it reserved the right to protect Russian interests in what it termed the "near-abroad."<sup>11</sup> Such protection would demand modern and combat-ready

forces. The Kremlin announced a number of significant military reforms following the conflict, mostly designed to improve responsiveness and command and control.

The US plan to “reset” relations with Russia after the conflict in Georgia was likely interpreted by Putin as an attempt to marginalize or weaken his position as prime minister. By fostering greater cooperation with the more liberal elite under Medvedev, the US could steer Russia toward a less confrontational path (while still pursuing its geopolitical goals). The reset, however, was doomed to fail, as it was based on the false assumption that Putin was no longer in control. Despite warmer diplomatic rhetoric during Medvedev’s presidency, the Kremlin remained determined to change the post-Cold War global security order.

Russia’s resistance to perceived American hegemony was also reflected in major military exercises in 2009 directed against a nominal Western enemy.<sup>12</sup> Despite earlier talk of rapprochement, where Russia would work with NATO and the US in combatting common threats, the Kremlin began to openly plan to defend against Western aggression. Continued US plans to deploy elements of a missile defense system in Europe riled Kremlin leaders, who insisted that this system was directed against them. Although Russia and the US were able to hammer out a new strategic nuclear weapons treaty, it was clear to the Kremlin that Washington and Brussels were still reluctant to accept Russia as an equal power. Improving Russia’s military capabilities grew increasingly important.

Midway through Medvedev’s presidency the Kremlin began to unleash a virulent information campaign which portrayed the West, and the US in particular, in an increasingly negative light. In its jaundiced portrayal, the US/West was becoming the source of every global ailment. For instance, unrest stemming from the Arab Spring was blamed on US geopolitical meddling, where, under the guise of democracy promotion, the Americans were stoking unrest to strengthen their position on the global chessboard. Even Russian weather reports were open to manipulation. During the summer heat wave in Central Moscow in 2010, one popular explanation was the US use of climate weapons against Russia.<sup>13</sup> The Kremlin displayed increasing facility in weaponizing information, firing this propaganda at the Russian people.

Kremlin proposals in 2009-10, under the “liberal” Medvedev government, to restructure the European security system were ignored or ridiculed by the US and NATO.<sup>14</sup> In the fall of 2011 the Kremlin grew indignant when, after supporting a UN resolution authorizing the use of force to protect civilians in Libya, certain NATO countries exceeded this mandate to remove the Libyan leader. Here again was “proof” that the US-led Western order believed that it could act with impunity. From Putin’s perspective (or at least from their propaganda machine), only robust and modern armed forces could stop the US and NATO from using the same superior military force against the Kremlin.

Relations became more strained in September 2011 after Putin announced his intention to return to the presidency. After the December 2011 Duma elections (where the pro-Kremlin party won an overwhelming majority of seats), relatively large demonstrations

took place in Moscow and other cities protesting against alleged election fraud and Putin's automatic claim to the presidency. Putin and the Kremlin's media machine quickly identified the West/US as the instigator behind these protests and the anti-American rhetoric was ratcheted up.<sup>15</sup> Russian defense officials increasingly began to talk about the need to defend against the bacillus of color revolutions.

One of Putin's key platforms before returning to the presidency in May 2012 dealt with modernizing Russia's Armed Forces. He pledged to invest some 23 trillion rubles (\$770 bn) "over the next decade to purchase more than 400 intercontinental ballistic missiles, more than 600 combat aircraft, dozens of submarines and other navy vessels and thousands of armored vehicles."<sup>16</sup> While some of this increased military spending was designed to attract the support of Russians working within the defense industry, part of it also stemmed from the growing belief military strength would be the key component in defining the country's future. It was not long before the Kremlin found the opportunity to test this hypothesis.

## **Ministers of Defense under Putin**

Another way of tracking Putin's evolving view toward the military is by examining the four individuals who have served as minister of defense since he has been president. His first minister of defense was General Igor Sergeyev, who was a holdover from the Yeltsin administration. Sergeyev had been chief of Russia's Strategic Rocket Forces, and his appointment may have reflected the Kremlin's reliance upon nuclear forces during the chaotic late 1990s as its primary means of defense. Sergeyev lasted only one year under Putin and was replaced in March 2001 by Sergey Ivanov, Putin's close KGB associate.

Ivanov's appointment was interpreted by many as the Kremlin's attempt to truly subordinate the military to civilian control. It might also be construed as instilling a KGB-type mind-frame into the military, where not only the political commissar keeps control over the military, but also elite forces or the use of espionage takes precedence over conventional operations. During the Soviet period the military had assumed a disproportionate role within the government, economy, and society, and by appointing a nonmilitary officer to the top position, Putin made clear who would direct the military. Ivanov remained minister of defense for almost six years, helping to reduce the size of the bloated military structure and helping to construct the institutional groundwork for future reforms.

Ivanov's replacement in February 2007 was a surprise to most within the military. Anatoliy Serdyukov, who had served as the Kremlin's chief tax inspector, had minimal military or security experience, and was perhaps best known for his aggressive investigation during the trial of Russia's most famous imprisoned oligarch, Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Some Russian commentators suggested that this appointment signaled that the Kremlin was serious about cracking down on one of Russia's most pernicious problems within the military—corruption.



It was under Serdyukov that Russia began one of the most substantial military reforms over the past century. After the brief conflict with Georgia in August 2008, the Kremlin leadership had concluded that Russian interests could only be protected with robust and combat-ready military forces. Mobilization units were eliminated and the overall number of officers was slashed. Many senior military personnel spoke out against these radical reforms, claiming that the “new look” military merely mimicked reforms in the US and would weaken Russia’s overall defense posture. A few aspects of the reform plan were later modified, but the major structural changes were implemented. The Kremlin political leadership was able to deflect criticism of the reforms and direct it toward the increasingly unpopular Serdyukov.

Prior to Putin’s return as president in May 2012 (though, in reality, he had never left), he had announced a massive plan to modernize the country’s Armed Forces. More than 20 trillion rubles would be allocated to improve the country’s defense industrial infrastructure and to rearm the military. The Kremlin had been under increasing pressure to replace the unpopular Serdyukov, and when details of the rearmament plans (and possible control over these revenue flows) were released, media attacks alleging high-level corruption and malfeasance among Serdyukov and his associates increased dramatically. He was relieved in November 2012 for corruption-related charges and replaced by Sergey Shoygu, Putin’s close associate.

Shoygu’s appointment as defense minister might indicate the Kremlin’s continued high priority for military modernization. He had built a reputation as an extremely effective manager, having served as Emergency Affairs Minister for nearly 20 years, where he developed a responsive C2 system. Among other initiatives as defense minister, Shoygu has focused thus far on creating responsive military units and a strong C2 system.

## **Current State of Russian Military**

A military often reflects the strengths and the weaknesses of the country it purports to defend. While the country still faces serious problems, over the past 15 years Russia has made many material and social improvements, and these advances are replicated within its Armed Forces and other security agencies. First and foremost, the soldier as defender of the Russian state has been returned to his revered pedestal. The Kremlin has been able to largely transform the sorry, discredited image of the Russian soldier, which had developed after the collapse of the USSR, into the proud and professional “polite green man.”

### *Infrastructure and Equipment*

Overall living conditions for military personnel have improved since the latest round of reforms began in 2008. Officer and contractor pay is largely competitive with other government agencies. Living conditions for one-year draftees (e.g., barracks, food, uniforms, etc.) have become much better. The waiting list for adequate housing for military officers has finally shrunk to manageable levels. Discipline within the ranks has

improved and there are far fewer reported cases of hazing.<sup>17</sup> The military continues to develop a nascent non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps to provide training expertise, discipline, and continuity within the contract and draftee ranks.

There have been similar improvements in the realm of military equipment and training facilities. Significant funding has been allocated toward modernizing everything from the soldier's basic kit to advanced weapon systems. Russia is in the midst of developing modern combined arms training facilities where military personnel can test the latest tactics and equipment in a realistic training environment.<sup>18</sup> The confusion after the 2008 reform of the military's education system (where nearly 75% of the military schools were closed or consolidated) has subsided and the reorganization has resulted in greater efficiency and less redundancy.

### *Manpower*

The Kremlin has recently enacted legislation which provides incentives for young Russian men to fulfill their military obligation while enrolled in college. Select students will gain credit for military service by working on projects related to the country's defense industry.<sup>19</sup> Legislation has also been introduced whereby future government service and the right to travel abroad are contingent upon completing some form of military service.<sup>20</sup> Theoretically, this legislation should reduce draft evasion.

Even with these improvements, however, defense officials still struggle to attract a sufficient number of soldiers as one-year draftees or to enter contract service. Demographic challenges combined with a general reluctance to join the armed forces have stymied plans to staff the military with around one million personnel (220,000 officers, 425,000 contract personnel and 350,000 draftees). The draft contingent today would have been conceived during the economic-stressed period of the late 1990s. Not only is the potential draft pool considerably smaller, but, according to some reports, a significant percentage is also simply unfit for military duty due to health problems and criminal records.<sup>21</sup>

There are also questions as to the combat readiness and technical expertise of a draftee manning system. One year is hardly long enough to become fully proficient in even the most basic soldier skills, and the constant turnover of personnel weakens combat readiness. Earlier, defense officials claimed that conscript soldiers would not be deployed, but there is evidence that draftees fought in both Georgia and Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> Some have suggested that the one-year draft is primarily designed to raise patriotic awareness and create a large mobilization reserve in the event of major hostilities.<sup>23</sup> Defense officials also envision those who have completed their one-year draftee service as the primary pool for contract soldiers.

Similarly, there have been considerable problems attracting sufficient qualified contract soldiers within the Russian military.<sup>24</sup> From its inception in the 1990s, the program has been poorly managed and funded. Up until quite recently, many contract soldiers were the wives of officers. As the administrative promises sometimes did not correspond with

reality, those who signed contracts often left the military when contract provisions were unmet.<sup>25</sup> To date, the infrastructure to support contract personnel (e.g., family housing) remains insufficient. Questions also remain regarding long-term career progression for contract soldiers and retirement benefits.<sup>26</sup>

According to Kremlin reports, as the prestige, living conditions and salary for military officers have improved over the past few years, so has recruitment and retention. The reality appears to be less sanguine. While there has been an increase in applications to attend military officer schooling, many of those who graduate prefer to serve in the reserves. The officer promotion and assignment system remains arbitrary, where the immediate commander holds inordinate sway over the officers serving in his command.

### *Military Organization*

One of the key reforms enacted after the 2008 conflict with Georgia dealt with transforming the old Soviet mobilization model of manning to creating some 85 combat-ready brigades. To simplify command and control, three intermediate levels of command were mostly eliminated (divisional, corps and army levels). Part of the justification behind this change was the conviction that the demands of modern war would not allow for a slow, deliberate period of mobilization. The enemy could strike quickly and hard, and unless Russian forces were prepared to fight on a moment's notice, the war might be over by the time mobilization was completed.<sup>27</sup> While exact statistics are classified, given the current manpower challenges, likely only a certain percentage of these brigades are truly combat-ready.<sup>28</sup>

Prior to this reform to create combat-ready brigades, Russian military leaders had relied upon their airborne forces as their rapid reaction force. For instance, airborne forces played a key role during the conflict with Georgia in 2008, helping to seize key territory. As problems have developed with manning and training sufficient draftees to maintain these conventional combat-ready brigades, greater emphasis has now been placed upon airborne or special-forces-type units, which are primarily manned with contract or professional soldiers. These forces would likely serve as the nucleus in any future combat.

At the other end of the defense spectrum, there have been continued developments and improvements within Russia's strategic nuclear forces.<sup>29</sup> Russia's nuclear weapon arsenal remains a chief hallmark of its superpower status. Faced with the perceived conventional superiority of US/NATO forces, Russian defense officials have suggested the possible use of nuclear weapons to thwart an attack. Even more disconcerting than Russia's plans to modernize its nuclear arsenal have been the not-so-casual suggestions over the past year that the Kremlin might launch nuclear weapons to protect its interests.<sup>30</sup>

Another key reform from 2008 helped to streamline the command and control of the Russian Armed Forces. The previous six military districts were consolidated into four joint-like commands, oriented toward a specific threat.<sup>31</sup> In this new model, parochial interests of the former branches have theoretically been subordinated to an overall

command structure, which also incorporates elements of other power ministries. Overall command and control is now exercised by a massive new national military control center in Moscow.<sup>32</sup> On paper at least (and on the virtual screens of the new control center in Moscow), there is much greater unity of effort among the various Russian security forces (e.g., MVD, FSB, Emergency Ministry, etc.).

### *Situation Today*

The ongoing conflict in SE Ukraine has had a profound effect upon both Russian security agencies and the larger population. The massive information campaign depicting this conflict as an attack upon ethnic Russians and defense against Western-sponsored Ukrainian-fascist nationalists has elevated patriotic sentiments among a wide portion of the population to feverish levels. To date, there has been no shortage of young and middle-age Russian men who are willing to volunteer, though not necessarily in the Russian military, to defend against this perceived threat. There is some question, therefore, as to the degree that these patriotic sentiments translate into actual service in the Russian military, either as a draftee or contract soldier.

The Kremlin's insistence that regular Russian military forces are not involved in this conflict has helped to confound the military's manpower challenge. A Russian patriot (who may also be attracted by the alleged high mercenary pay) would likely see little advantage in joining the official military when he can fight on his own terms, and presumably for a higher salary, under the proxy forces in SE Ukraine. Despite the patriotic fervor of the media, parents of young Russian men, who clearly remember the horrors and deception of the Kremlin in the Chechen Wars, are likely taking additional measures to ensure that their sons avoid military service. Already Russian military officials have resorted to secrecy and intimidation to silence the grieving families who have lost soldiers in this conflict.<sup>33</sup>

In gauging the strength of Russia's military today, one other point bears mention. Just as in other areas of society, the Kremlin-supported media have played a prominent role in transforming the sorry image of the Russian military of the 1990s into the professional, proud and presumably combat-ready force of today. Virtually, the Russian military has become a force to be reckoned with. There remain questions, however, to what degree this image corresponds to reality. In this regard, one might recall the comment made by Putin in 2002 (who was quoting Churchill): "Russia was never so strong as it wants to be and never so weak as it is thought to be."<sup>34</sup>

## **Putin's Future Military Plans**

Given the nature of the current Russian political system and the inherent fickleness of human nature, making any firm prediction regarding Putin's future military plans is nearly impossible. Keeping hold on presidential power remains Putin's primary objective. The current Russian constitution will allow Putin to remain president until 2024, when he will then be 72 years old. Even without the threat of foreign invasion, provided fossil fuel

revenues remain healthy (allowing for moderate economic growth), the Kremlin will likely be able to continue persuading the Russian people that their form of managed democracy is preferable to a more genuine version. This economic stability will also provide for some degree of continued military modernization, which could translate into a more assertive foreign policy.

Conversely, should fossil fuel revenues fall sharply and prolonged Western sanctions deepen, the Russian economy would likely fall into a serious recession. There are serious doubts, however, whether a profound economic downturn would weaken the Kremlin leadership and/or ameliorate Russian foreign policy approaches, particularly in the near abroad. Theoretically, a weakened Russian economy would hamper plans to modernize the military, which, in turn, might make the Kremlin more risk averse. The Kremlin leadership, however, has proven itself adept at both import substitution and convincing its population of the priority of bullets over beans.

To date, there are similar doubts as to the effectiveness of Western-imposed economic sanctions upon altering the Kremlin's aggressive position toward Ukraine. While Russian economic growth has declined over the past year, the Kremlin leadership has blamed this decline on a nefarious Western plan to weaken Russia. Anti-American and anti-Ukrainian sentiments have reached dangerous levels. Despite the current economic hardship, Putin enjoys extremely high approval ratings, and this support could be channeled into further aggression against Ukraine or other regions where the Kremlin perceives it has legitimate security interests.

Realpolitik considerations will also help to shape Putin's future military plans. He apparently sincerely believes that a multi-polar system of global governance is superior to a uni-polar model. Many within the Kremlin leadership maintain that US global supremacy stems largely from its military prowess. To serve as a counter-pole to the US, Russia must develop an equally robust and combat-ready military.

The continued conflict in SE Ukraine also serves to support and justify the Kremlin's anti-Western narrative and continued military modernization. In its rendition, the US/West stage-managed the forceful change of government in Kiev in order to gain a staging ground from which it can attack and weaken Russia. From the Kremlin's perspective, the conflict in SE Ukraine has less to do with the fate of "Novorossiia" (historical name given to areas under separatist control in Donetsk and Lugansk regions) than with the very survival of the Russian state. If the Kremlin were to back down, this perceived weakness would be exploited by nationalists or those interested in genuine political reform. Despite the growth of an equally virulent Ukrainian nationalism which depicts Russia as the greatest threat, Putin continues to refer to Ukraine as an integral part of the Russian world.<sup>35</sup> To retreat or return to the status quo could fatally damage the very legitimacy of Putin's regime.

The logic of the Kremlin's current predicament points toward continued attempts to reconstruct this Russian world. Soft power will likely remain the preferred strategy behind this expansion, but the overt or covert use of military or harder forms of power

cannot be ruled out. As such, the plans to reform and modernize Russia's Armed Forces will remain a high Kremlin priority. Foreign economic pressures could delay these efforts, but Russia retains a relatively strong military-industrial base, where research and development of new weapon systems has increased over the past decade. Moreover, even if they are unable to develop their own modern military technology, Russian security managers have proven skillful at procuring key components via other means.

The conflict with Ukraine has revealed a number of other important aspects as to how the Kremlin might employ force in the future. For years Russian military theorists have been arguing that there are a number of preliminary coercion measures that should be employed before using military power. These entail everything from information operations to diplomatic and economic pressure, from the employment of local proxy forces to co-opting cultural, religious and business leaders. Espionage, targeted assassinations and other indirect methods of suasion are used against the target country before the possible introduction of "polite green men."<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

In the Kremlin's narrative, Vladimir Putin has strengthened the Russian state over the past 15 years. After the chaos and humiliation of the 1990s, he has worked to lift Russia off its knees to stand strong as a global power. The country's economy and the material well-being of a majority of Russians have improved dramatically. There have been similar improvements within Russia's Armed Forces. The image of the demoralized, poorly equipped and defeated soldier of the mid-1990s has been replaced by the patriotic, professional and combat-ready "polite green man" of today.

These improvements have, however, come at a cost. In constructing and consolidating this strong Russian state, the Kremlin leadership has restricted a number of civic freedoms. Russia today lacks genuine political opposition, media freedom or truly independent courts. Most major business interests are closely tied to the Kremlin. The seedlings of civil society which developed during the 1990s have been largely suppressed. Russia's foreign policy has also changed direction since Putin's arrival at the Kremlin. The pro-Western orientation of the 1990s has been replaced with a Eurasian vector where a military powerful, conservative Russia has become the counterweight to the liberal West.

A critical component of the Kremlin's consolidation of power has been the development and propagation of a dangerous nationalist ideology, which posits that the West/US is determined to weaken Russia. Playing upon the resentment and humiliation of the 1990s, the Kremlin-supported media juggernaut has convinced the majority of Russians that the West/US/NATO present a dire threat. To protect Russia from this danger, the country needs a modern and combat-ready military.

The effects of this perilous ideology have been on display in Ukraine over the past year, where Russia's closest neighbor has been transformed into a dangerous enemy. Today, a

significant percentage of the Russian population believes that they have an obligation to defend their ethnic brethren in Eastern Ukraine from the predations of the pro-Western government in Kiev.

The Kremlin leadership has thus constructed a governance model and ideology largely predicated upon defending ethnic Russians, regardless of national borders. The extent to which this ideology is realized could depend, to a significant degree, on the continued modernization of its Armed Forces.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32066222>

<sup>2</sup> There is much debate as to the authorship of Putin's dissertation. It is clear that whoever wrote it borrowed material (without citation) from other sources. <http://nationalinterest.org/article/vladimir-putin-on-russian-energy-policy-600>

<sup>3</sup> C.W. Blandy, "Dagestan: The Storm, Part 2," Conflict Studies Research Centre, June 2000, pp. 46-8.

<sup>4</sup> Much has been written over the past few years on this topic. The Kremlin control over the country's national media has profound security implications. See for example: <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/RAD-123-2-5.pdf> For a more recent example see: <http://time.com/rt-putin/>

<sup>5</sup> As in the earlier Iraqi war (1990-91), some Russian military leaders predicted that US-led forces would suffer significant casualties after engaging the Iraqi forces. As in 1991, they were duly impressed with the initial advances of the 2003 conflict, particularly with western high-precision weapons. However, Russian security officials soon adopted a "told-you-so" attitude once the conflict transformed into an insurgency.

<sup>6</sup> Putin's logic apparently goes something like this: Various Chechen leaders were given asylum in the West, from where they could help orchestrate terrorist acts. For a fuller explanation, see: [http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/pm\\_0334.pdf](http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/pm_0334.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> For the text of Putin's full speech, see: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html>

<sup>8</sup> For a recent example, see: <http://www.mk.ru/politics/2015/04/05/studentov-postavyat-pod-kiberruzhe.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://rt.com/news/239409-russia-quits-conventional-europe/>

<sup>10</sup> The list is long and continues to evolve. For instance, the two major Russian TV stations each host at least one program dedicated to military affairs. For a sample, see: [http://russia.tv/brand/show/brand\\_id/12506](http://russia.tv/brand/show/brand_id/12506) or <http://www.1tv.ru/sprojects/si=30>

<sup>11</sup> For a brief review of Russia's foreign policy under Medvedev, see: <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/Medvedevs-Foreign-Policy-Period-of-Stabilization-15453>

<sup>12</sup> The scenario for the Zapad 2009 exercise was built around defending Belarus from a possible NATO invasion. For additional details, see: [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=35558#.VSQqizF\\_-4](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35558#.VSQqizF_-4)

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<sup>13</sup> These allegations began on the fringe of Russian media, yet as the temperatures increased were widely circulated and cited by mainstream sources. For background, see: [http://www.rferl.org/content/Russian\\_Scholar\\_Warns\\_Of\\_Secret\\_US\\_Climate\\_Change\\_Weapon/2114381.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Russian_Scholar_Warns_Of_Secret_US_Climate_Change_Weapon/2114381.html)

<sup>14</sup> For an example of western commentary on this initiative, see: <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/09/russia-s-proposed-new-european-security-treaty-a-non-starter-for-the-us-and-europe>

<sup>15</sup> See for instance: <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/russia-and-former-soviet-union/putin-calls-color-revolutions-an-instrument-of-des-118993.html>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/putin-russian-military-to-get-770b-upgrade/> A key Kremlin constituency during Putin's 2012 presidential campaign were the millions of Russians involved with the country's military-industrial complex.

<sup>17</sup> The lower numbers may reflect an improvement in discipline; they might also reflect tighter media control within the media.

<sup>18</sup> For additional background, see: <https://russiandefpolicy.wordpress.com/tag/mulino/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.mk.ru/editions/daily/2015/03/31/stranu-zashhitit-inzhenernyy-specnaz.html>

<sup>20</sup> Russian officials are attempting to make mandatory military service a requirement for all young Russian men. See: <http://www.newsweek.com/russia-require-officials-undertake-military-service-316950> However, there will likely be mechanisms which will still allow the well-connected to avoid military service.

<sup>21</sup> <http://sputniknews.com/military/20131004/183935173.html>

<sup>22</sup> There have been a number of unofficial reports which have alleged that Russian draftees have fought (and died) in SE Ukraine. See: <http://www.ibtimes.com/young-russians-dodge-draft-more-more-avoid-risk-fighting-ukraine-1804246>

<sup>23</sup> <http://rt.com/politics/defense-draft-russia-shoigu-529/>

<sup>24</sup> See entry dated 4 April 2015: <https://russiandefpolicy.wordpress.com/category/manpower/>

<sup>25</sup> There are also concerns that some draftees have recently been forced to sign contracts, allegedly to help support combat operations in SE Ukraine. See: <https://en.informnapalm.org/involuntarily-military-service-russia-conscripts-imposed-contract-trip-rostov/>

<sup>26</sup> For a current analysis of manpower problems within the Russian military, see: <https://dgap.org/en/article/getFullPDF/26625>

<sup>27</sup> For a detailed examination of these reforms, background and preliminary results, see: [http://vid1.rian.ru/ig/valdai/Military\\_reform\\_eng.pdf](http://vid1.rian.ru/ig/valdai/Military_reform_eng.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> Officially, Russia has no military units involved in SE Ukraine. However, there is some evidence that Russia has deployed battalion-sized units from distant regions to the Ukrainian border. See, for instance: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31794523> Those Russian brigades situated close to the Ukrainian border are presumably in a higher state of combat-readiness.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/experts-see-russian-strides-nuclear-force-updates/>



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<sup>30</sup> While some of these not-so veiled threats have been made by (Kremlin-sponsored) journalists, even President Putin has indulged in nuclear saber-rattling. See: <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-putin-crimea-documentary/26901915.html>

<sup>31</sup> They have since added a 5<sup>th</sup> joint strategic command directed at protecting their Arctic interests. See: [http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/OEWatch/201410/Russia\\_03.html](http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/OEWatch/201410/Russia_03.html)

<sup>32</sup> There has been considerable conjecture as to which power ministries will be coordinated from this new C2 center. As in other countries, bureaucratic coordination among similar agencies can prove difficult. For a brief snapshot of the new center, see: <http://rt.com/news/210307-russia-national-defence-center/>

<sup>33</sup> While the Russian Ministry of Defense continues to deny official involvement, there is considerable evidence that Russian soldiers have fought and died while fighting in Ukraine. See: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/19/russia-official-silence-for-families-troops-killed-in-ukraine> or <https://news.vice.com/article/it-is-a-government-crime-the-coffins-of-russias-ghost-soldiers-in-ukraine-are-coming-home>

<sup>34</sup> [http://www.upi.com/Business\\_News/Security-Industry/2006/07/10/Policy-Watch-Is-Russia-strong-or-weak/39541152565695/](http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2006/07/10/Policy-Watch-Is-Russia-strong-or-weak/39541152565695/)

<sup>35</sup> On various occasions, Putin has suggested that Ukraine may not be a truly sovereign nation. See, for example: <http://www.newsweek.com/putins-ukraine-war-about-founding-new-russian-empire-319832>

<sup>36</sup> For an explanation on this “new” form of Russian warfare from a Baltic perspective, see: <http://www.naa.mil.lv/~media/NAA/AZPC/Publikacijas/PP%2002-2014.ashx>  
In this ‘power-vertical’ strategy, there is no division between state and private interests; all elements of state power are exploited. For those charged with defending the besieged Russian state and advancing its interests, this approach results in a mindset of persistent, unending 24/7 conflict. As during the communist period, Russia remains in a state of constant war. As the Chief of the Russian General Staff remarked in 2013, “In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a tendency toward the elimination of the differences between the states of war and peace is becoming discernible. Wars are now not even declared, but having begun, are not going according to a pattern we are accustomed to.” General Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, February 26, 2013. <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>